

The Little Library That Could

Arizona's Parker Public Library is a lifeline for its patrons, but it's struggling to stay afloat **By Christine Wicker**



OON THE WINDSWEPT plains of western Arizona sits the town of Parker (pop. 3,140). It has no central movie theater and no bookstores. What it does have is a library. When staffer Jeanie Smith opens the doors of the modest building on Mondays at 9 a.m., a crowd is usually waiting.

There's James Johnson, a cook and classic-movie fan, who is returning two John Wayne films. Post Office clerk Angie Crusinberry claims her favorite chair to read a mystery. A teacher from the nearby Colorado River Indian Reservation shushes her students as they run in.

Parker's library is one of the busiest in the country. But like so many others across the U.S., it's struggling to stay alive.

Contrary to what many predicted, the digital age has not rendered the nation's 16,671 public libraries obsolete. Instead, it's brought a pulsing new energy as patrons use the free computers and Internet access to research term papers, look for jobs, update Facebook pages, and more.

In January 2009 (the latest date for which figures are available), over 25 million Americans reported visiting their libraries more than 20 times in the previous year, a 23 percent rise

from 2006. But at least 17 states have reported closures, and 16 percent of libraries have reduced hours.

In July 2010, the Parker Library's annual budget plunged from \$215,000 to \$168,000. Book purchases were halted, hours were cut, and the full-time staff was trimmed from four to two.

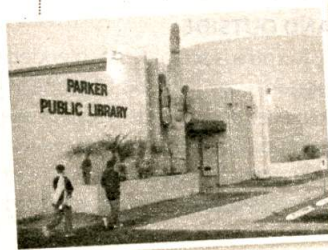
The impact on the community could have been devastating. In La Paz County, where Parker is located, more than 25 percent of the people live below the poverty line, so residents depend on the library's free health screenings, lectures, movies, reading groups, and story times. "The library

binds our town together," says Buni Hooper, owner of the Gingerbread House preschool, who brings her students there often. "And it has pretty things the kids are allowed to touch. It opens up a whole new world for them."

Just as crucial are the library's 20 computers. One patron, Dori Siers, 67, uses them to email her son, who is in the navy and has been at sea for four months. "If it weren't for the library, I don't know how I'd communicate with him," Siers says.

In the afternoons, eighth grader Devanie Fernandez and her friends check their

ALL ARE WELCOME
The library gives Parker's teens—and everyone else, from toddlers to seniors—a serene, safe place to socialize and read.



Facebook and MySpace pages, play games, and slouch on the worn couches. "Without the library," she says, "there really would be nothing to do after school."

When word of the library's troubles broke, the town rallied. Membership in the Friends of the Library group increased; the VFW gave \$100 and the Soroptimists \$500.

"We've got a high mountain to climb, but we'll climb it for the people who live here," says library manager Ruthie Davis. "I love the people of Parker." Her voice breaks, and she wipes her eyes. "They need this library."

Ensuring its long-term survival requires bigger solutions, such as the creation of a new library district. But the local pastor's wife, Tammy Brookbank (a part-time employee), is not waiting for the government or a foundation to swoop in and save them.

Because of budget cuts, the library seldom gets a thorough cleaning. So Brookbank recently came in after hours to shampoo the carpets. "Somebody had to do it. It's like the pioneer days."

At 7 p.m., Smith shoos out the stragglers and locks the doors for the night. She's exhausted—but satisfied. "Every day, I know I'm doing something important for the community." ■

For information on how you can help the Parker Library, go to Parade.com/library